

NEW U.S. CITIZENS DREAM OF BUSINESS SUCCESS, RAISING FAMILIES

**By Elizabeth Kelleher
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WASHINGTON, JULY 26 -- Imran Aftab grew up in a poor area of Karachi, Pakistan, and came to the United States on a scholarship to Bard College in New York in 1991. Since then, he has earned a graduate degree, married, had two children (is expecting a third), and started a successful Internet development company that employs 30 people in Pakistan.

But even with all of those milestones, Aftab said, he had accomplished something especially important July 24, when he was sworn in as a U.S. citizen in a ceremony at the Department of Veteran Affairs. "Tonight I will go get my passport," he said. As a businessman, it will be easier for him to travel with an American passport to places he does business, like Argentina, Canada, the Philippines and South Africa.

Aftab said that some of his goals as a new American are more idealistic. He hopes to show his Pakistani employees how, as an American business-owner and a Muslim, he works well with businesspeople of other faiths, some of whom have become his clients.

Aftab joined 24 other new citizens at the swearing-in ceremony at the Department of Veterans Affairs. The U.S. government naturalizes 700,000 people a year.

Some of the new citizens came to the United States to practice their religion freely or speak openly. Some came for economic opportunities. Some came simply because they married an American.

In a video presentation, President Bush congratulated the new citizens, saying, "Your home is now your country," and reminded them that the United States is a nation of immigrants.

Emilio Gonzales, director of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, swore in the group and also made "American by Choice" awards. The awards, given to immigrants who demonstrate commitment to the United States and its values, were awarded to Retired Major General Antonio Taguba and Katja Bullock.

Taguba immigrated from the Philippines and has had a distinguished military career. In 2004, Taguba conducted an investigation of detainee abuse at Abu Ghraib Prison in Iraq. Since his retirement in 2006, he has headed a mentoring program to train American officers and enlisted men of Asian-Pacific descent to succeed in their careers.

Bullock immigrated from Germany and has worked as a personnel specialist for three U.S. presidents.

James Nicholson, secretary of the Department of Veteran Affairs, spoke to the new citizens about his ancestors' immigration from Scotland and Ireland. "We [Americans] are all descended from

immigrants,” he said. He listed immigrants who today contribute to American business, sports and entertainment, including baseball player Sammy Sosa, from the Dominican Republic, and Cuban-American singer Gloria Estefan.

Lance Corporal Sona Babani, 20, who immigrated to the United States with her parents from Iraq 10 years ago, led a pledge of allegiance to the U.S. flag. She is a Marine who works as an administrative clerk at a base in Quantico, Virginia, and was herself sworn in as a citizen. “We came here for the freedom, like everyone,” she said of her family. She said she values her freedom to practice her religion as she sees fit and her freedom of speech.

For more information, see Visas and Immigration
(http://usinfo.state.gov/gi/global_issues/immigration.html).

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